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# Winning the Battle of the Narratives in Afghanistan

Case, Dean J.

JSOU and NDIA SO/LIC Division Essays

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# 2010 JSOU and NDIA SO/LIC Division Essays



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JSOU Report 10-4

2010 JSOU and NDIA SO/LIC Division Essays





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The JSOU Strategic Studies Department is currently accepting written works relevant to special operations for potential publication. For more information please contact Mr. Jim Anderson, JSOU Director of Research, at 850-884-1569, DSN 579-1569, james.d.anderson@hurlburt.af.mil. Thank you for your interest in the JSOU Press.

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# Foreword

**T**he Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) partnered with the Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (SO/LIC) Chapter of the National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA) in sponsoring the annual chapter essay contest. The first-place winner is recognized each year at the NDIA SO/LIC Symposium in mid-February, and the prize is \$1,000 cash. The runner-up receives \$500.

The competition is open to resident and nonresident students attending Professional Military Education (PME) institutions and has produced outstanding works on special operations issues. These essays provide current insights on what our PME students see as priority national security issues affecting special operations.

Essay contestants can choose any topic related to special operations. Submissions include hard-hitting and relevant recommendations that many Special Operations Forces commanders throughout United States Special Operations Command find very useful. Some entries submitted are a synopsis of the larger research project required for graduation or an advanced degree, while others are written specifically for the essay contest. Regardless of approach, these essays add value to the individuals' professional development, provide an outlet for expressing new ideas and points of view, and contribute to the special operations community as a whole.

JSOU is pleased to offer this selection of essays from the 2010 contest. The JSOU intent is that this compendium will benefit the reader professionally and encourage future PME students to enter the contest. Feedback is welcome, and your suggestions will be incorporated into future JSOU reports.

Kenneth H. Poole  
Director, JSOU Strategic Studies Department

# Winning the Battle of the Narratives in Afghanistan

*Dean J. Case II and Robert Pawlak*

*In order to win the information operations war against the Taliban, the U.S. policymakers first need to repackage their narrative and ensure that it is expressed using frames that Pashtuns are familiar with. Rather than pushing a secular frame filled with themes of democracy, human rights, and rule of law, the U.S. should use frames that reflect both Pashtun beliefs and moderate Islam.*

The war against terror cannot be won with force or money alone; in order to beat Al Qaeda and the Taliban, you have to have a compelling cause; this is a war that has to be won through moral authority.

— Hamid Karzai<sup>1</sup>

The fight in Afghanistan exemplifies the challenges of irregular warfare, defined by the Department of Defense (DoD) as a “violent struggle for influence over the population.”<sup>2</sup> Consequently, this struggle for influence can be neither enticed nor coerced. Rather, the battle for the proverbial *hearts and minds* of the Afghan population is one that neither force nor materiel resource alone, or in tandem, can win. By many accounts the Taliban is currently winning this war, despite a significant deficit in both military and materiel resources. One reason behind this asymmetric success is the edge the Taliban enjoys with their information operations (IO).<sup>3</sup> They

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are able to do this by employing narrative frames the Afghan population readily understands, providing ample proof to legitimize their narrative, as well as enjoying a high degree of consistency between their strategy and narrative. Alternately, the U.S. communicates through secular frames that lack cultural familiarity, tout a narrative lacking proof in comparison to the Taliban's, and lacks consistency with its strategic goals and narrative.

**Table 1. Comparison of Elements of Taliban and U.S. IO**

	<b>Frame</b>	<b>Social Proof</b>	<b>Narrative</b>
<b>Taliban</b>	Islamic Sharia	Transparent	Justified by Sharia
<b>U.S.</b>	Secular	Lacks transparency	Democracy, human rights, rule of law

The U.S., in order to win the IO war against the Taliban, needs to take advantage of the narrative gap that exists between the Taliban and Afghanistan's Pashtun population by moving its narrative closer to Pashtunwali than the Taliban's Sharia-laced narrative. However, expressing U.S. goals in Afghanistan through the lens of Pashtunwali is easier said than done. As Afghan President Hamid Karzai noted, it all starts with the cause.

In spite of the glaring differences between the Taliban's IO and those of the U.S., the U.S. still has both the time and opportunity to turn the tables and gain the advantage. As Max Boot, a senior fellow for National Security Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, noted:

The war in Afghanistan is far from hopeless. With a slightly greater commitment of resources and the introduction of a sensible, unified strategic plan (something we've lacked so far), we can still turn the tide against the Taliban who remain intensely unpopular with most Afghans [*sic*].<sup>4</sup> That is far cheaper and more realistic than throwing up our hands in despair and dealing with the fallout of defeat.<sup>5</sup>

His comments directly address the lack of consistency within and proof to support the U.S. narrative. Alternately, the Taliban's IO relies heavily on a stilted, religious content that espouses their brand of Sharia law. While this construct adds consistency and clarity to their IO, it also abrades the Taliban's largely Pashtun audience.<sup>6</sup> While Pashtuns comprise approximately 40 percent (about 10 million people) of Afghanistan's population, they are the country's single largest ethnic group.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, the majority of the

Taliban's senior leaders come from Afghanistan's largest Pashtun tribe, the Ghilzais. The significance is that in order to win the war for the influence over Afghanistan's population, one must win the war to influence the Pashtun.

Pashtuns, who are largely xenophobic, hold their code of Pashtunwali closer than Sharia. Consequently, Taliban efforts to enforce elements of Sharia that conflict with traditional Pashtun beliefs create fissures, which could be exploited to drive a wedge between the Taliban and the Pashtun. One example of this possibility was the shifting of support from the Taliban to the U.S.-backed Northern Alliance in 2001, where a catalyzing factor behind this realignment was widespread dissatisfaction with the Taliban and its heavy-handed enforcement of their version of Sharia law.

U.S. strategic goals in Afghanistan are to deny terrorist safe haven and prevent regional meltdown, yet U.S. narratives revolve around themes of democracy, human rights, and rule of law.<sup>8</sup> This nexus between a stable Afghanistan and American democratic values is tenuous at best. Simply put, a stable Afghanistan does not necessarily need to be an Afghanistan that embraces U.S. style democracy. Alternately, the longest period of stability in Afghanistan was brought about by the Taliban from the fall of the Soviet-backed government in 1991 through 2001.

## Pashtunwali

To begin to understand Pashtunwali and what it means to a Pashtun, it is necessary to examine some of its basic elements. The key element of Pashtunwali is *nang*: a concept that includes honor, dignity, and shame. Maintaining the honor of the individual, the family, and the tribe is perhaps the most important daily issue for a

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*Maintaining the honor of the individual, the family, and the tribe is perhaps the most important daily issue for a Pashtun.*

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Pashtun. To be called *benanga* (shameless, undignified) is possibly the worst insult that can be delivered to a Pashtun. In such an instance it is considered acceptable that the insulted may kill the insulter to regain his *nang* and social status.<sup>9</sup> Maintaining and protecting one's honor is directly linked to one's identity as a Pashtun. All elements of Pashtunwali reflect back to the honor of the individual Pashtun and may concern elements such as *badal* (revenge) and *melmastia* (hospitality). Revenge is directly tied to honor in that it is a method for an individual to restore one's honor in the face of

insult or wrongdoing. Failing to seek revenge against a transgressor causes a further loss of honor on the original victim and his family. Such losses of honor are not limited to violent infractions such as the wrongful death of a family member, but include more benign acts such as providing hospitality. It is the obligation of a Pashtun to provide hospitality without desire for recompense to anyone who should ask for it. Failure to do so dishonors the individual and his family. What is important to understand is how closely related Pashtunwali and the notion of honor are to the identity of the Pashtun. Pashtunwali is so integral to the Pashtun that there exists no distinction between practicing Pashtunwali and being a Pashtun.<sup>10</sup> The individual Pashtun's identity is bound up in preserving his honor (*nang*) and is found in his close unquestioning observance of the code of conduct shown in Table 2.

**Table 2. Elements of Pashtunwali**

Nang	Honor, dignity, shame
Benanga	Shameless, undignified
Badal	Revenge
Melmastia	Hospitality

Pashtunwali stresses egalitarianism. It emphasizes personal autonomy and equality of political rights in a world of equals.<sup>11</sup> Understanding this factor is extremely important in conducting operations in Pashtun areas of Afghanistan. This is a world that does not welcome outside influence into matters that are considered personal and private. Members of families may be on equal footing, and boys are educated to obey elders, but there is a subtle line that cannot be lightly crossed. Even elders sitting in legitimately recognized councils, as members of shuras and jirgas, at times may not strictly dictate to younger men how to manage their affairs and must take care that their decisions are understood by the younger as just and in accordance with generally accepted values; the leaders cannot expect the younger to obey automatically.<sup>12</sup> This allows the individual Pashtun, young or old, to retain his honor in accepting the advice of others, as opposed to being subjugated to the will of another man or group.

Barfield writes that "being a *real* Pashtun demands that one not just speak Pashto, but *do* Pashto."<sup>13</sup> Part of this *doing* is accomplished by maintaining autonomy. Fredrik Barth noted that Pashtun speakers who had forsaken



their autonomy for the political protection of Baluch khans were no longer viewed as Pashtun by their neighbors, but instead were seen as Pashtun-speaking Baluchs.<sup>14</sup>

By these examples we can observe that within Pashtun culture a code of conduct exists; it is tied directly to an individual's identity and mandates he preserve his honor and autonomy. Understanding this factor is key in seeking a means of influencing this population. These examples illustrate that an individual Pashtun's autonomy and honor are matters of both private and public maintenance. Private matters are not for public interference, and any outside influence must be exercised in a manner that allows the individual or family the ability to maintain its dignity and honor. The further away from the individual or immediate family the interference comes from, the more delicate the influence must be because the potential for slight and resentment grows exponentially. Historically, governing bodies outside of the district such as the national government are not well received on principles of autonomy alone. The rift grows ever wider with the introduction of foreigners and yawns hugely in the face of non-Muslims. These factors indicate that any serious consideration of employing a strategy of influence in Afghanistan demands that the source of influence must be crafted to appear to emanate from as local a source as possible to ensure acceptability.

## The Role of Frames and Social Proof

Frames are necessary elements of any social movement. They are employed by groups in order to build internal consensus, generate external support, and justify actions. When comparing frames, these three separate elements need to be examined in terms of the problem they identify, the recommendation they make, and the action they are requiring from both internal and external audiences.<sup>15</sup> Typically, these three elements are expressed in the form of a *motivating trinity* that labels the protagonist as good, the antagonist as bad, and justifies the necessity of the conflict.<sup>16</sup> Robert Benford and David Snow succinctly describe the reason that groups use frames:

In part as movement adherents negotiate a shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need of change, make attribution regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to affect change.<sup>17</sup>

Other important elements contained within a frame are themes familiar to the target audience. By aligning frames with themes familiar to the target audience, a group is able to achieve narrative synergy. Thus they are able to deliver a message whose meaning transcends its content.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, by co-opting culturally familiar themes, audiences are generally less likely to filter out information contained within a given frame. This functions on the cognitive level since the frame expresses a message that conforms to the audience's sense of bounded rationality.<sup>19</sup> Simply put, bounded rationality

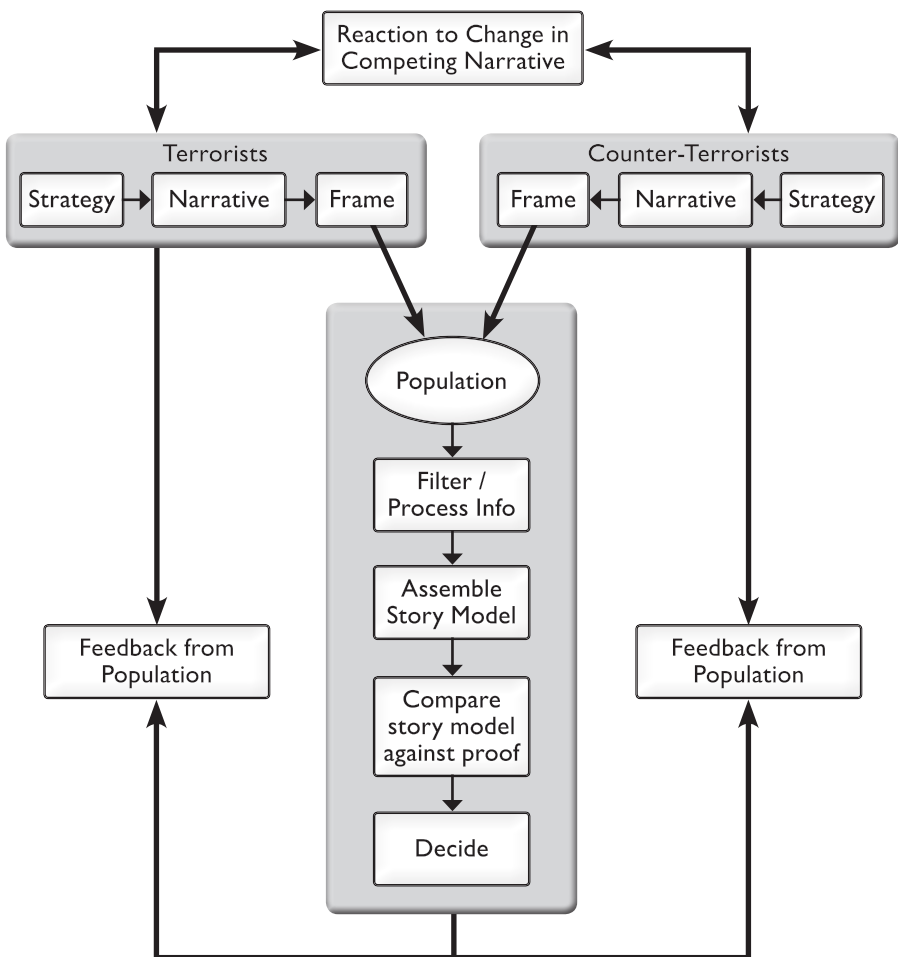


Figure 1. The battle for influence over the population in Afghanistan—the role of competing narratives, frames, and social proof

is the minimized model of the world that all people construct in order to effectively process all the potentially overwhelming information received from various, and sometimes competing, sources.

Frames are significant in the context of generating support for social movements because they represent an expedient means of providing information to the population from which a group is attempting to elicit support. The audience in turn unpacks the information contained in the frame and reassembles it to conform to their sense of bounded rationality.<sup>20</sup> Hastie, Penrod, and Pennington call the product of this process an individual's story model.<sup>21</sup> They then weigh this information against whatever proof exists to support a group's claims. Once the audience has reconstructed the information and assembled their story model, the audience then weighs the validity of a group's claims against the presence or absence of proof. Next the individual renders what is essentially a verdict. This verdict is not necessarily one of guilt or innocence, but rather one of legitimacy. Ultimately, a series of frames that effectively motivates intragroup consensus and motivates external support is deemed effective.

Consequently, frames play a large and central role in the development of social movements. Effectively constructed and employed, frames are able to help create movements able to overcome significant materiel deficits. This generally typifies the conditions experienced by insurgents or terrorists and further underscores the necessity of winning the IO war.

## **The U.S. Frame and Social Proof**

The United States centers its narrative on democratic principles such as equality, human rights, and rule of law and expresses these themes through a secular frame. While these themes resonate with a domestic U.S. audience, they are not clearly understood by the average Pashtun. As altruistic as they may seem, the U.S. narrative unfortunately has the ability to both alienate the target audience and unwittingly provide another layer of proof for the Taliban's narrative. This does not mean that our goals or intentions in Afghanistan are wrong. Rather, it supports the observation that our goals in Afghanistan have been crafted and expressed through a uniquely American lens.

The vehicle for achieving these goals contained within the frames of the United States is the performance of the democratically elected Afghan government and their security forces. Yet many observers note that both

are essentially the same warlords who governed Afghanistan prior to the 2001 U.S.-led invasion and that Hamid Kharzi is little more than the mayor of Kabul.<sup>22</sup>

By attempting to compel Pashtuns to accept American solutions for governance and security, the U.S. is executing policy that was wrong footed from the start. Notoriously xenophobic, Pashtuns view outsiders and their influence as a violation of *nang*, their code of honor. Western concepts of rule of law and equality often undercut the authority of local leaders and customs by inviting outsiders into issues that are private matters to be settled privately, resulting in a loss of honor to those concerned. The ill will that this creates can easily fuel *badal* if left unchecked as well as provide opportunity for the Taliban. Consequently, John Dempsey, head of the U.S. Institute of Peace's Kabul office, noted in a May 2009 interview, "Afghans are largely disillusioned with the whole democratic experiment."<sup>23</sup>

While Pashtuns are admittedly egalitarian, the Pashtun audience largely fails to make a connection between their sense of freedom and the U.S. theme of democracy. The U.S. expresses Western ideals using themes that are rich in content when viewed through our cultural lens, but fail to resonate when viewed through the eyes of a Pashtun. An example lies in the perceived failure to curb corruption within the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) and the Afghan security forces. Rampant corruption within the government is a source of public discontent, and curbing it is a top priority for U.S. policy-makers.<sup>24</sup> Yet this is easier said than done. As noted earlier, many Afghan civil and military leaders are little different than the warlords who have traditionally governed Afghanistan. Consequently, calls to curb corruption are met either with skepticism or ignored.

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*... the Pashtun audience largely fails to make a connection between their sense of freedom and the U.S. theme of democracy.*

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When viewed through the U.S. lens, corruption is either a rule of law concern or a function of democracy that voters correct by casting their ballots. Alternately, when viewed through a Pashtun lens, corruption becomes a matter that local and tribal leaders remedy through *jirgas* where community leaders create transparency through consensus.

Likewise, the disparity between the U.S. strategic goals in Afghanistan and the themes contained in the U.S. narrative adds another layer of friction to the problem. Current U.S. strategic goals are focused on denying terrorists

safe haven and prevent a regional meltdown.<sup>25</sup> While an American may intuitively see the nexus between democracy and stability, this is a result of the effectiveness of the U.S. narrative on its own audience. Yet in the same manner that the U.S. narrative fails to resonate with a Pashtun audience, Pashtuns do not see how democracy is synonymous with stability. Alternately, the U.S. narrative potentially achieves the opposite of its intended effect by providing a constant reminder that the U.S. and its goals operate well outside the realm of Pashtunwali. This is the unintended consequence of projecting narratives that resonate with U.S. audiences onto a Pashtun audience.

Consequently, the U.S. frame in Afghanistan fails to generate the support needed to gain and maintain influence over the population. This is evident in the lack of internal consensus within the GIRoA and its security forces, as well as the lack of active popular support for the U.S.-backed government.

Ultimately the social proof provided to Pashtuns by the U.S. frame is that they—the U.S., coalition forces, the GIRoA, and Afghan security forces—are yet another outside influence seeking to push a foreign system of government on Afghans. From an Afghan or Pashtun perspective, there is little perceptible difference between the U.S. frame and that of the Soviets during the 1980s. Both are foreign nations who threaten their communities and their traditions.

## **The Taliban Frame and Social Proof**

The Taliban, by using the formal theological language of Sharia, appeals to the rich and widely understood Islamic theological tradition.<sup>26</sup> Consequently, they are able to co-opt the inferred legitimacy of Islam into their IO. Importantly, this also allows them to extend the theological implications of the battle between good and evil into their narrative. Alternately, the U.S., while using local language, lacks the familiar and legitimate frames used by the Taliban. The result is that the Taliban's message, while not perfect, clearly dominates the message of the U.S.

The Taliban, by centering their frame on the language of Sharia, as Professor Thomas Johnson suggests, creates a box around their target audience. In order to penetrate this box, the Taliban reasons, one would have to adopt language whose perceived strength and legitimacy is greater than the theological language of Islam.<sup>27</sup>

Contained within these frames are the core elements of the Taliban's narrative: the Afghan government is corrupt, U.S. and NATO are malign

foreign actors, and the Taliban can restore security and order to Afghanistan. Barnett Rubin listed a series of specific themes contained within the Taliban's narrative and how these are used:

Recruit support based on government corruption, civilian casualties caused by coalition/NATO (especially air power), resentment of the expulsion of Pashtuns from Northern Afghanistan, intimidation, supplying of justice, consistent and reliable organization, and ability to pay some fighters.<sup>28</sup>

Hence, the Taliban is able to connect their narrative with themes that resonate with their Afghan audience. Further packaging their narrative and its associated themes within a Sharia frame ensure that the audience will not filter out the Taliban's message. Lastly, by including themes that point directly to malign foreign influence, the Taliban also effectively aligns their narrative with Pashtun xenophobia. On a cognitive level, this functions to ensure that the message conforms to the audience's sense of bounded rationality. Since it conforms to the audience's preconception for what they expect to hear and it conforms to how they view the world, they are less likely to reject it without consideration.

Additionally, the Taliban is able to provide ample proof to substantiate their narrative. In large parts of Afghanistan, especially in the troubled Southern provinces, the Taliban operates an effective shadow government.<sup>29</sup> This government provides courts, levies taxes, and maintains their own governmental and security apparatus. Their courts not only enforce violations of Sharia but also hear civil complaints. While at times brutal, the Taliban's courts provide both reach and responsiveness that Afghanistan's legitimate legal system lacks. Similarly, the Taliban's taxes go to pay for the fighters who provide security within the Taliban's area of control. Likewise, the Taliban has gone to great lengths to stamp out *baksheesh* (corruption).<sup>30</sup>

The Taliban's consistent narrative, use of familiar frames, and ample social proof provide them a clear edge in the battle to gain influence over the Afghan population. An additional element of proof rests in the fact that the Taliban are virtually uncontested in large parts of Afghanistan. Taliban commanders and mullahs frequently and freely meet with village elders, spreading the Taliban's influence while sending the additional message that the *Americans and NATO may come and go, but we will always be here.*<sup>31</sup>

### Comparing Competing Narratives and Frames

When comparing the competing narratives, the audience operates much in the same way a jury operates during deliberation. First, each opposing side’s story is taken and reconstructed by the individual so that it conforms to their sense of bounded rationality. Then this repackaged story model is compared against the availability of proof to substantiate the claims of the story. What follows is that the story model is either legitimized or delegitimized by the presence or absence of associated elements of proof. Finally, the individual makes a decision or in the case of a jury member, renders a verdict in favor of one side of the story.

**Table 3. Side-by-side comparison and evaluation of current Taliban and U.S. narratives, frames, and proof**

	Narrative	Frame	Proof	Advantages/ Disadvantages
<b>Taliban</b>	Sharia law	Islam	Shadow government, civilian casualties caused by coalition, curbing corruption	(+) Narrative consistency (+) Employs familiar frame (+) Substantial proof (-) Conflicts with Pashtunwali
<b>U.S.</b>	Democracy	Secular	Elections, support for GIRoA	(-) Lacks consistency (-) Uses unfamiliar secular frame (-) Lacks proof

Given the current state of IO in Afghanistan, this process clearly favors the Taliban’s narrative. While significant differences exist between members of a jury and a population in the midst of irregular warfare, the role played by competing narratives, frames, and proof is nearly identical. People, when making decisions to support or reject an insurgency, operate in a manner similar to an evidence-based jury; no matter how well scripted the argument, compelling evidence is required in order to gain majority support.

### The Rift between the Taliban and the Afghan People

The fault line between the Afghan people, and the Pashtuns in particular, and the Taliban lies in the divide between the Taliban’s brand of Sharia and Pashtunwali. While closely associated and even familiar to the beliefs held by Pashtuns, the Taliban’s version of Sharia undermines several key elements of Pashtunwali:

- a. Role of the jirga in deciding local and tribal matters—that is, the Taliban’s series of shadow courts have replaced the time-honored jirgas at the expense of local leader’s influence.
- b. Local leaders are reluctant to issue orders or edicts to another Pashtun for fear of violating their deeply held sense of egalitarianism.
- c. Pashtuns bristle at the harsh punishments rendered by the Taliban.<sup>32</sup>

## Regaining the Initiative

Admiral Mike Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently noted that Afghanistan had been an economy-of-force operation for too long.<sup>33</sup> His statement coupled with the announcement that the new strategy of the U.S. in Afghanistan would focus more on increasing the capacity of the Afghan government to meet the basic needs of its people and less on conventional military operations. This shift in strategy results partially from the recognition that elements of U.S. strategy and operations in Afghanistan serve to enable and legitimize aspects of the Taliban’s narrative.

Although the new strategy of the U.S. will help turn the tide against the Taliban and represents a clear and unified strategy, which was previously missing, it still lacks a consistent narrative that will help drive a wedge between the Taliban and the Afghan people. While U.S. strategic goals focus on the basic needs of the Afghan people as the means to a stable and secure Afghanistan, its narrative still contains themes that resonate and motivate U.S. domestic audiences, not Afghan audiences.

An example is the recent firestorm of criticism, from both within the U.S. as well as from other NATO countries, over Afghanistan’s passing of a body of laws that govern Shia family life.<sup>34</sup> One element of this family law was termed a *rape* law because it seemingly guarantees a husband the right to have sex with his wife, even when she says no.<sup>35</sup> While this theme resonates with domestic audiences, to Afghans it provides another example of how the U.S. is trying to force its will and beliefs on Pashtuns.

To win the IO war against the Taliban, U.S. policymakers first need to repackage their narrative and ensure it is expressed using frames that Pashtuns are familiar with. Rather than pushing a secular frame filled with themes of democracy, human rights, and rule of law, the U.S. should use frames that reflect both Pashtun beliefs and moderate Islam. A retooled U.S. narrative should rely on frames that reinforce local jirgas as the source



of grass-roots democracy in Afghanistan, reinforce the role of moderate Sharia within Afghan civil society, and continue to promote efforts to curb corruption within the Afghan government and security services. This new narrative, expressed within the frames of moderate Islam and Pashtunwali, would deftly enable the U.S. message to resonate better with the Pashtuns than the Taliban message.

Consequently, the final element necessary to gain narrative legitimacy and influence over the Afghan people is observable proof. This proof comes in three forms:

- a. Increased security for the population, to include those in rural areas
- b. Increase in the capacity of the Afghan government to meet the basic needs of its people
- c. Success in curbing corruption within the Afghan government.

Ultimately, this will enable the U.S to win the war of the narrative, and the IO war in Afghanistan, by providing the Afghan people with a familiar narrative, fully supported by observable proof.

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